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ABSTRACT

Teachers should understand how the persuasive process employed by advertisers affects consumers' cognitive responses. They should also be aware of the purposes and techniques employed by the American consumer movement, which is attempting to augment the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers. Since a review of the current rights of buyers and sellers suggests that the balance of power lies with the seller, teachers should consider ways to equalize the situation. For example, students and teachers might discuss the fact that product categories may be classified as either desirable, salutary, pleasing on a short-term basis only, or deficient. Next, students might select several ads. Since studies have shown that a person's predisposition toward a product is a good indicator of whether or not the person will buy that product, students' predispositions toward the products mentioned in their ads might be measured. If students are predisposed to buy the advertised product, and if, in addition, the product is classified as either deficient or merely immediately pleasing, students might role play a counterattitudinal advocacy situation in order to inoculate them against the advertiser's persuasion. (TS)

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CLASSROOM TECHNIQUES TO EVALUATE ADVERTISING IN MAGAZINES

by

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At the 61st Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in November 1971 a resolution was passed by that body to "find means to study dishonest and inhumane uses of language and literature by advertisers, to bring offenses to public attention, and to propose classroom techniques for preparing children to cope with commercial propaganda." Shortly thereafter NCTE announced the formation of the Committee on Public Doublespeak to pursue with vigor this resolution and more broadly to investigate not only advertising but politicians and other major public manipulators of language in our society.[1]

Those of us who serve on this Committee know it is no small task to ferret out dishonest and inhumane uses of language by advertisers. Rarely is an advertisement by a large company blatantly dishonest for all ads appearing in national media have been carefully scrutinized by appropriate members in the advertising agency that generated the ad and staff members of the company that will run the ad under its name. These highly trained individuals are schooled in the latest legislation covering permissible statements etc. which may appear legally in advertising matter.

Yet, those of us as consumers who are exposed to these ads--some would say bombarded by these ads--have occasion frequently to question at least part of the message feeling a degree of annoyance at the seeming gall of the advertiser because of some of the claims made. Although appropriate government agencies--The Federal Trade Commission and the Federal Communication Commission--would decree that no law has been violated our sensibilities as buyers with unlimited wants and scarce means to satisfy these wants are often offended.

If we are to meet our responsibilities as members of the Committee, we must find appropriate classroom procedures to help children deal with this

very powerful and persuasive institution we call advertising. To do this we must have a good understanding of how the goliath functions to persuade us to commit and sometimes over-commit our scarce resources.

The Persuasion Process

Our understanding of the function of advertising is enhanced if we recognize some basic contributions made by communication theorists and psychologists of motivational research. Traditionally in persuasion research this formula was accepted: M x A = E where M is the message, A is the appeal and E is the effectiveness of the appeal. With the contributions of the motivation researcher a new element was added to the formula. Now the formula reads (M x A) P = E. The addition of the P for predisposition revolutionized the persuasion formula for it suggested the persuadee contributes in large part to the success of any communication. Successful appeals must consider the needs, assumptions in short the psychological characteristics of the receiver of the persuasive message.

An advertiser or any other persuader must first isolate the needs and assumptions of the intended audience and prepare an appeal to meet those needs. Communication will take place if the receiver agrees with the message and perceives the message as compatible with his needs.[2]

As psychologists focused on predisposition or the contribution of the receiver in the communication process they discovered that receiver response or cognitive functioning took place at four levels each with several dimensions. The first level, the unconscious response level, is most difficult to conceptualize for it deals with galvanic skin response, heartbeat rate, eye dialation and other physiological responses. These can best be studied in the laboratory and although important are not a central focus for our discussion.[3]

A second level of response is called the immediate cognitive response that a receiver has while exposed to an advertisement. This level relates to feelings, emotions, personal experiences and attitudes. This level has to do with how people perceive and affectively interpret the message. Attitude scales have been designed which accurately record predispositions toward products. Our discussion here is very much involved with such responses and they will be discussed in more detail later.

A third level of response is the level of learning that takes place as a result of exposure to an advertisement. These are the elements recorded in memory for short term recall and longer term retention. In this discussion recall and retention are not significant considerations. They require follow-up, often the next day. Under normal classroom experience this is sometimes impossible because of changing schedules and waning interest on the part of students.

The final level of response is the action or behavior that takes place as a result of the communication experience. Will the person in fact purchase the product? Often this level of response is difficult to trace to a particular advertisement particularly since it is removed in time. Also, other considerations enter into whether a receiver of a message buys a product. For example, peer opinion or availability of funds are considerations that would be difficult to measure. We would not be able to determine with any degree of accuracy how much or how little these other considerations influenced a decision. For this reason, this level will not be crucial to our present discussion.

As suggested earlier the immediate cognitive response level will be the focus of our concern. This has to do with what we know about the advertisement and how we feel towards the message. Students can be asked

to bring to class youth magazines[4] they regularly read. Perhaps some of the class will need to bring in several issues for those who cannot readily supply their own. After specific instructions the students leaf through the magazine until they find an ad they wish to study. After they find an ad for which they have a certain fascination, they are encouraged to study the ad to prepare to rate it.

After extensive research into attitude formation and by careful sampling techniques using descriptive adjectives an appropriate attitude scale was designed to rate advertisements. The ads were rated on three factors: attractiveness, meaningfulness and vitality. Attractiveness suggests whether the ad is liked. Meaningfulness suggests the ad delivers a message that is understood, considered important, and believable. Vitality reflects the liveliness of the ad. Attractiveness and meaningfulness are well established by the research while vitality remains to be verified by additional research.[5]

Attitude Scale for Print Ads

	5 4 3 2 1	
Beautiful	_ _ _ _ _	Ugly
Attractive	_ _ _ _ _	Unattractive
Appealing	_ _ _ _ _	Unappealing
Interesting	_ _ _ _ _	Uninteresting
Meaningful	_ _ _ _ _	Meaningless
Convincing	_ _ _ _ _	Unconvincing
Honest	_ _ _ _ _	Dishonest
Fresh	_ _ _ _ _	Stale
Lively	_ _ _ _ _	Lifeless
New, different	_ _ _ _ _	Common, ordinary

Figure 1

This attitude scale for print ads has been generated to reflect readers' attitudes toward the message. The student responds on a five

point scale. High scores represent strong positive attitudes toward the message. An extremely high score of forty-five or better would suggest a strong predisposition toward the product. The advertisement strongly encourages a want or need on the part of the reader. Since predisposition is considered by researchers as a precursor to behavior, it is entirely likely that the reader will buy the product in the near future. The respondent agrees with the ad if it is compatible with perceived needs.

We maintain that psychologists involved in motivational research have shown us that attitudes toward products can be determined by the use of attitude scales. We now know that a person's predisposition toward a product is a good prediction of whether the person will buy the product. What can we do with this knowledge in classroom settings to help children to be better buyers? We need to alert our students to the consumer movement which is currently growing in momentum to strengthen the relative position of buyers.

What is Consumerism?

Consumerism is a social movement seeking to augment the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers. To understand this definition and its deep social meaning we need to examine the traditional rights of sellers and buyers and to scrutinize the efforts being made by consumer advocates to modify the relative influence of the sellers.

Certain sellers' rights have been well established by law and custom in the United States.[6]

1. To introduce any product into the marketplace so long as it is not hazardous to personal health or safety. If it is judged hazardous, it may be introduced with certain safeguards.

2. To set the price on the product so long as there is no discrimination among similar classes of buyers.

3. To promote the product so long as it does not limit competition.

4. To formulate any message about the product that is not misleading or dishonest.

5. To introduce buying incentive schemes.

The courts have interpreted these rights over the years in such a way that businessmen have had a great deal of flexibility and freedom. To limit these rights materially would greatly change our marketing arrangements in this country.

Buyers too have rights protected by law.

1. To refuse to buy a product offered to them.

2. To expect the product to be safe.

3. To expect the product to be essentially as represented by the seller.

A review of the rights of both buyers and sellers suggests the balance of power lies with the seller. The seller has the services of motivational research personnel to help to determine buyer wants and plan messages to appeal strongly to these wants. Consumers are not collectively organized and represented by equally qualified researchers who can suggest ways to resist appeals which reach us through the media.

Only lately have consumer advocates begun to speak out for additional rights. These demands include

1. To have adequate information about the product.

2. To obtain additional protections against questionable products and marketing practices.

3. To influence products and marketing practices in directions that will increase the "quality of life."

Until such time as favorable legislation is forthcoming to realize these demands, the consumer is left largely to his own resources to carefully select the products purchased. Although he is left to his own devices, consumer influence can be quite formidable if given some direction or guidance. The model below car be utilized to make judgments about products.

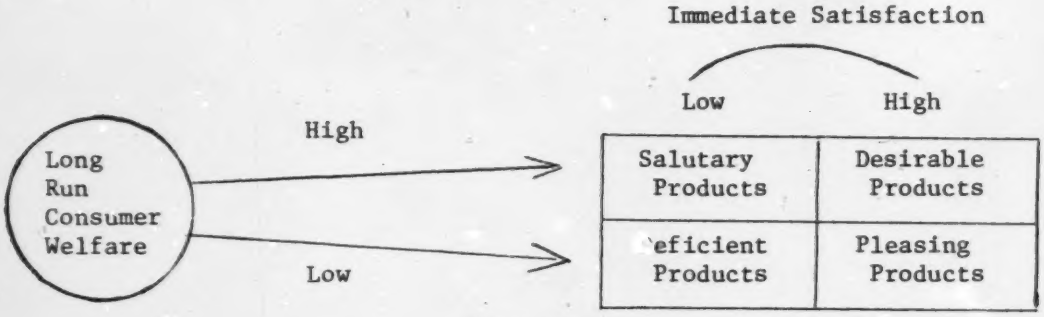

Figure 2

Salutary products are those which have low appeal but which are also highly beneficial to the consumer. Some foods, perhaps liver, and warm durable clothing which may not be high fashion are examples which often are resisted by students. Deficient products have neither immediate appeal nor salutary qualities. Poorly constructed toys and some sports equipment made of non-durable materials fall into this category. Desirable products are those which combine high immediate satisfaction and high long run benefit. Tasty nutritious breakfast foods can be considered in this category. Pleasing products are those which give high immediate satisfaction but which may hurt the consumer interest in the long run. Alcohol and non-prescription drugs are examples of this category.

If students can be helped to identify deficient products and pleasing products for which they respond favorably on the attitude scale shown above, classroom instruction in counterattitudinal advocacy can encourage a

move to salutary products and desirable products. A look at consumer behavior in the past suggests that immediate gratification through pleasing products has been more highly valued than delayed gratification through salutary products. There is some evidence that this may be changing. Certainly appropriate classroom instruction can hasten this process.

Counterattitudinal Advocacy

In counterattitudinal advocacy the student encodes (either speaking or writing) a message at odds with his prior beliefs.[7] An argument against a product is created despite having previously expressed on an attitude scale strong positive feelings toward the product. This serves as a kind of self-persuasion. The individual will modify his attitudes toward the product to conform with the argument presented against the product. Earlier it was suggested attitudes precede behavior. This theory suggests attitudes are modified as a result of behavior.

Perhaps this can be best explained by use of an example. The students selected several ads from youth magazines and employed the reaction profile. One high scoring ad was selected for class discussion. After thorough review of the message general agreement was forthcoming that the product being advertised was one appropriately categorized as a "pleasing product." It provides high immediate satisfaction but may hurt consumer interest in the long run. One student who rated the ad very high is selected to role play[8] a situation where she must find arguments against the product. Let us say the product is a beauty aid and widely used by girls in the school. Several students testified that under certain circumstances the user loses sight of the amount of cosmetic applied and produces a look that is anything but glamorous.

The role player is assigned the task of informing a friend she is

using too much of the product. Her responsibility is to prepare arguments against overuse of the product. The theory suggests by creating an argument against overuse of the product the role player's own attitude toward the product will change. Indeed, a sort of self-persuasion against the product or at least excessive use of the product will take place. Counterattitudinal advocacy can change attitudes toward a product which could result in not using the product or at least using the product more moderately.

Counterattitudinal advocacy is strong medicine. There are certain moral considerations in its use with students in a classroom situation. If after careful consideration the teacher feels that it should not be used then so-be-it. But, when we consider the tremendous efforts being made by advertisers to encourage us to buy products perhaps strong measures are needed. There are many deficient products and pleasing products which do not contribute to the long range good of society.

As a member of the Committee on Public Doublespeak, I have assumed the responsibility along with my fellow committee members to identify ways we teach children about advertising. Heretofore our efforts have been sporadic and based on antiquated research concerning persuasion. In this new approach the student selects ads that are of interest to him. Rates the ad on an attitude scale. Determines whether the product contributes to the long range good of society and presents arguments against products which do not. This seems a good way to help children to evaluate their wants for commercial products. Now there is something to do about products that do not seem to contribute to society. Counterattitudinal advocacy deserves a try. Only time will tell whether it will have staying power.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Rank, Hugh (Ed.). Language and Public Policy. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1974, p. xi.

[2]Foch, Hans H. "Psychological Research and Effective Persuasion," The Journal of Communication. 8 No. 4 (Winter 1958) p. 196.

[3]Plummer, Joseph T. "A Theoretical View of Advertising Communication," The Journal of Communication. 21 (December 1971) p. 318.

[4]For a bibliography of youth periodicals see: Lavina Dobler and Muriel Fuller. Dobler World Dictionary of Youth Periodicals. New York: Citation Press, 1970, pp. 25-30.

[5]Wells, William D. "EQ, Son of EQ, and the Reaction Profile," Journal of Marketing. 28 (October 1964) p. 51.

[6]Kotler, Philip. "What Consumerism Means for Marketers," Harvard Business Review (May-June 1972) p. 49.

[7]Miller, Gerald R. and Michael Burgoon. New Techniques of Persuasion. New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1973, pp. 59-75.

[8]Shaftel, Fannie and George Shaftel. Role Playing for Social Values. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967.